Analyzing the role of digital platforms in health communication: A Study of Delhi-NCR

SHORT SYNOPSIS

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by

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby declare that the short synopsis **"Analyzing the Role of Digital Platforms in Health Communication: A Study of Delhi-NCR"** being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Journalism & Mass Communication under Faculty of Media Studies & Humanities of Manav Rachna International Institute of Research & Studies, Faridabad during the academic year 2019-20.

It is a bonafide record of original work carried out under the supervision of **Dr. Suman Kumari** and has not been submitted in full or part to any other university or institute for degree or diploma. Further, it is certified that short synopsis is plagiarism free and proof has been submitted.

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ABSTRACT

Health Communication is the study and use of communication strategies to promote health literacy and effective healthcare. Digital media being a fast, interactive and accessible medium has a great potential to motivate and influence individual's behavior, medical practitioners and policy makers to improve health outcomes. Individuals today are actively seeking information through internet to live a healthy life. They are also engaged in generating and sharing health related content through online health portals including video conferencing with the doctors, emails, online discussion forums, etc. The goal of this research is to find out the role of digital mediums in communicating healthcare practices. In the process the study will identify various digital platforms used for health enhancement by public as well as health practitioners. It will also involve studying the quality of health content available on these digital platforms and analyzing the health-seeking behaviour of individuals. Further, it aims to find out the barriers in health communication through digital platforms and suggest possible measures to overcome these.

Keywords: *Digital media, Health communication, Health, Health literacy, Internet*

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INTRODUCTION

The 'Centre for Disease Control and Prevention' defines Health Communication as the "study and use of communication strategies to inform and influence individuals and community decisions that enhance health". The two broad aspects of health communication include:

a) Providing information in public domain for effective healthcare
b) Influencing and triggering action to adopt a healthy lifestyle by increasing health literacy

Health communication practitioners use various mediums to disseminate necessary and accurate health information. Digital media is one such popular medium, which is used to generate and share information regarding health practices. Digital media is a type of media which uses internet as a medium to produce and share content including text, images, videos, etc. For instance, it includes web pages and websites, electronic books and study material, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube etc.

Today, digital technologies have made inroads in the healthcare area. It is used to target audience, create messages as per their needs and engage them in an interaction through chat forums, comment sections etc. With the increasing acceptability and easy access, it is today widely used to facilitate communication in the health areas. Not just general public and patients use it as a medium to seek information on healthcare, but it is also actively used by the medical professionals, healthcare organizations and activists to create and spread informative content regarding health. It can be effectively used to influence and encourage individuals to adopt healthy habits.

There are multiple advantages of using digital mediums to promote health, which includes:

a) Providing basic and immediate information about various diseases, symptoms, precautions, and medicines at lower costs
b) Accessibility to a platform where patients and medical professionals can connect
c) Easy to share information

With the advancement of technologies over time, it is expected that there will be an increase in the usage of digital platforms to promote healthcare practices in the coming years. Today, seeking out information via internet is not a tough task. It is a convergent platform that provide plethora of information on various disciplines, health being one of those.

Health Information seeking behaviour of individuals basically refers to different ways in which people try to find out information about their health conditions, sickness, medicines, prevention of diseases etc. Digital mediums have brought a significant change in this information seeking behaviour. For instance, people are more alert and conscious about their health conditions. If they experience any sort of illness, they quickly look out for symptoms and its cure on the internet. Such behaviour signifies dependability of individuals on digital platforms for searching health related information. To provide supply to this adequate demand of information, there are electronic books, web pages, websites, social media, mobile apps etc available in the public domain.

Today, even healthcare companies and hospitals like 'Fortis Healthcare', 'Max Healthcare', 'Apollo Hospital', etc are offering services online through their websites and mobile application. There are online healthcare portals in India which provide much needed guidance on health issues, to provide support services to the information seekers. Some of these include 'Arogya', National Health Portal of India, ORS Patient Portal, 'Only My Health', 'Practo', 'Healthy India', 'Med India', 'BabyCenter', 'Vhealth', etc. These portals answer health and fitness related queries, create discussion forums, identify suitable medicines, provide connectivity with medical practitioners besides giving basic information on healthcare.

People who own smart phones are encouraged to maintain their health and fitness routine through various health apps like 'Pacer Pedometer & Step Tracker', 'Instant Heart Rate: HR Monitor', 'Fitbit', 'Healthifyme: Weight Loss Plan', 'My Fitness Pal', etc. Also, there are digital blood pressure monitors and fitness bands to keep a tab on your health data.

The quest for information is embedded in individuals. Digital platforms as an important information source seem to have almost all answers to their queries. However, it is also important to acknowledge the extent to which it can serve as a health support system in a country like India.

The research aims at exploring digital platforms which provide health support base to a wide range of population. Also, it will study the barriers of obtaining knowledge from the digital tools and suggest possible solutions. This will enable individuals to make effective use of online mediums to improve their health.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A good number of literatures have been studied for the concerned topic which includes e-books, research papers, websites and online health portals and journals.

Nutbeam (2000) explains one of the major aspects of health communication, i.e., health literacy. The research analyses past health education programmes and identifies the limitations of such programmes to achieve effective healthcare. After examining the major barriers for health promotion, this study creates a model to promote health literacy in the 21st century. However, this research does not focus on improving e-health literacy. Educating the masses about digital platforms is much required if we are talking about the 21st century here.

Focusing on the role of communication in the health sector, Richard (2006) highlights the growing need for and importance of communication to promote healthcare which is now recognized by the health professionals as well. His book also explores the positive and negative impacts of communication on health. For instance, a poorly led communication plan can lead to problems in diagnosis, confusions between patient and doctors, mistreatment, etc. Thus, it is very important to be effective in communicating the facts accurately. However, the book talks about the health status of Americans only. It cannot be generalized as healthcare practices differ from place to place.

Effective communication skills are very important for healthcare professionals. Berry (2006) highlights the role of communication in health promotion. As mentioned in his book, health communication is not just about dissemination of information, but also aims to bring a change in the behaviour of individuals. It also analyses research in the field of health communication to provide guidance to the experts and professionals. However, different mass mediums need different communication strategies. For instance, the strategies of print media differ from that of a digital media. This book does not provide a clear perception of that.

The new media provides great opportunities to widely disseminate health-based content. Parker & Thorson (2008) talks about the new media landscape and studies the various dimensions of health communication with a major focus on the emerging trends in healthcare. They highlights the importance of the internet in the promotion of health. As their book explains, the internet can be used as an effective tool in engaging consumers in healthcare advocacy. To bring about a change in the health practices by individuals, health literacy is very important. This book showcases how digital technologies can help in increasing health literacy.

The Internet has brought a revolution in the way we communicate. This can be reflected by increased usage of social media platforms, blogging, live chats and video conferencing, etc. The question posed here is how accurately the masses will understand health based knowledge through these platforms.

West and Miller (2009) states the idea that technologies in the digital age do create opportunities for both the health information seekers and healthcare professionals for medication and preventive care. Because of its affordability, connectivity feature and accessibility, policy makers consider internet as an effective tool to improve the health rate.

Health communication as a multidisciplinary field aims at bringing behavioral changes in the audience. Renata (2011) talks about the various dimensions of health communication. It serves as a great guide for healthcare professionals, researchers, medical experts and policy makers. As he puts, communication creates an interactive environment for sharing and exchanging health-based content. To inform individuals and influence their health-related decisions, effective communication is necessary. As explained by him, this social change requires efficiently designed communication programs aiming to influence the human behavior positively leading to improvement in health status.

Further, Hostetter, Klein, & McCarthy (2014) identify the potential of digital technologies in improving health care experiences at a reduced cost. Their report also mentions about bridging gaps between patients and health service providers through digital platforms.

In the technological era, social media can be useful in promoting better healthcare. Abdul, Gabarron, & Lau (2016) discusses ways in which social media connects patients, physicians, caregivers through blogs, social networking sites, etc. One of the important aspects of social media is to provide social and emotional support to patients and public. As mentioned in the book, “Patients can share their experiences through discussion forums, chat rooms and instant messaging, or online consultation with a qualified clinician.”

Edelsburg & Shir-Raz (2017) highlights the increasing role of digital media as a source of health communication. As described in their book, “The new media have become an important source of health information, and a platform for discussing personal experiences, opinions and concerns regarding illness and treatments, and have contributed to the shift in the role of the public from being recipients to an active and vocal entity.”

Digital health portals are gaining popularity among masses in the recent times. Other than providing basic health facilities, these websites facilitate communication between health seekers & medical experts. Tao, LeRouge, Smith, & Leo (2017) focuses on the quality of information on health websites. According to their study, few questions regarding the content on online platforms needs to be addressed. These include:

a) Is the information accurate?

b) Is the information complete?

c) What is the depth of information?

d) Is the information easily understandable?

e) How relevant is the available information?

Further, Neuhauser & L Kreps (2003) focuses on e-health communication. They review the traditional approaches and tries to create better ways to make effective use of digital media for health promotion. Observing the reports about deaths, deteriorating health conditions, they highlight the need to spread awareness on health and hygiene for which internet serves as an effective medium. This study explains the scope of e-health communication to improve the behavioral outcome of the masses. However, it fails to highlight the health-seeking pattern of individuals.

In the recent times, studies have focused majorly on the use of communication tools during COIVD19 pandemic. Mheidly & Fares (2020) have done an in-depth study in utilising communication strategies to fight Covid-19 situation. Their paper talks about the spread of misinformation regarding health through social media platforms. In the technological age, where information travels at a very faster rate, there is a need for accurate and reliable data to prevent the dissemination of false information. Here, health communication plays a massive role. This research discusses the impacts of infodemic and explores feasible ways to use the health communication strategies to deal with the pandemic.

Health education enables an individual to prevent or cure himself/herself from ill health conditions. However, one must use the information in an ethical manner. Paakkari & Okan (2020) raise concern for the issue of health literacy. During the pandemic, it was realized that poor health literacy among the masses is a big threat for the healthcare sector as health literacy is an important tool for the prevention of diseases. There has been a spread of fake health

related content on the social media platforms. Thus, health communication is much needed to bring a positive change in the health behaviour of individuals.

Ratzan et al (2020) studies the challenges faced during the Covid-19 scenario. He focusses on strengthening the communication strategies to facilitate healthcare. The researcher takes into consideration the challenges of dissemination of information regarding treatment, vaccines, health behaviours of people, spread of health-based content through social media and the relation between media and health literacy. This research has come up with communication guidelines to face a crisis like Covid-19, which talks about setting up goals, building networking, devising media plans, implementing & evaluating strategies and being flexible to changes.

For better health outcomes, **World Health Organization** has prepared '**a strategic framework for effective communication'**. The six principles as per the framework includes, "a) Accessible to decision makers,

b) Actionable by decision makers

c) Credible and trusted as perceived by decision makers

d) Relevant to decision makers

e) Timely to enable decision making

f) Understandable to decision makers"

Effective communication is extremely important to bring a positive change in the health information seeking pattern and health habits of masses.

GAP IDENTIFICATION:

An individual's dependence on digital media to seek information is influenced by factors like accessibility, age or education level. The underlying issue here is to find out if this is creating more disparities in the availability of health and fitness information. There is no denying the fact that healthcare portals bridge communication gaps between patient's and health advisers, but it might just remain limited to individuals who are familiar with the medium.

A good number of studies have analyzed the role of digital media in health promotion, but they have mostly focused on the social media platform. Also, there are very few studies that focus on the online health seeking behaviour in India.

The research will contribute to the limited literature that exists on exploring digital platforms to promote health communication. The findings can be utilized by the policy makers to improve the health communication system and make it faster and effective.

DESCRIPTION OF BROAD AREA

The broad area of research is Health Communication. As discussed above, health communication utilizes communication strategies to address health concerns including both preventive and curative healthcare. As the health sector is expanding its horizons in the current scenario, it has become a necessity to maintain basic standard of health. Communication plays a fundamental role in changing health behaviour of individuals. The aim is to empower the target audience regarding health issues and improve their living standard. In the digital era, it is easier to communicate between patients and healthcare specialists. In the ongoing pandemic of COVID19, doctors were able to treat patients through video calling and online messaging and health apps. Today, health literacy is a necessity. It can aid in the prevention of health issues and the protection of our health, as well as the better management of difficulties and unforeseen scenarios that may arise.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the use of digital tools in addressing public health issues
2. To find out the health seeking pattern of individuals
3. To analyze the usage of digital media by medical practitioners for better healthcare
4. To examine the case studies of successful usage of digital media for health promotion
5. To identify the barriers of digital mediums as a source of health-based content

HYPOTHESIS

1. HI- Digital media is a useful platform for addressing public health issues
2. H2- People use digital media because of its easy accessibility and cost effectiveness
3. H3- Health practitioners depend on the digital mediums for patients' treatment
4. H4- Digital media is popular tool for health communication among educated younger generation

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN: The research design will be Exploratory. The goal of this thesis is to explore the use of digital media to promote health communication. An in-depth examination of numerous digital platforms is required as part of the procedure. It will also aid in the definition of health communication in today's environment. The research design will provide an insight into health communication and discover ideas to utilize digital media for the same.

RESEARCH METHOD:

The thesis calls for both qualitative and quantitative method. Qualitative method will involve taking focus group discussion of healthcare professionals.

Further, Online health portals will be studied to find out the quality of information content available in the public domain. The study will also highlight the features of such portals for a detailed analysis.

Quantitative method will involve a survey through questionnaire. Participants will be stratified based on age, gender, and educational qualifications.

SAMPLING: Purposive Sampling will be the sampling technique used to conduct the focus group discussion and survey. It is a strategy in which the researcher chooses the elements for the sample based on his or her judgement. This thesis necessitates an in-depth conversation about digital media and health promotion with medical practitioners. A survey of people who utilize digital media for health-related purposes will also be undertaken.

Focus Group Discussion: 30

Doctors: 10

Nurses: 10

Pharmacist: 10

Survey: Total samples = 500

Male- 250

Female- 250

Geographical Area of Study: The area of study will be Delhi, NCR.

DATA COLLECTION TOOL:

- **Survey Questionnaire** for analyzing the usage of digital tools for health promotion and study the health seeking pattern of individuals.
- **Focus Group Discussion** to examine how medical practitioners use and rely on digital media to provide better treatment. Health practitioners will be included in the focus group.

EXPECTED OUTCOME OF THE RESEARCH

With the increasing usage of mobile technologies and internet, it can be said that digital media has become an integral part of our lives as it is easily accessible and cost-effective. People use digital platforms to obtain information on various issues, healthcare being one of those. With the help of online health portals, health apps, availability of medical practitioners online, it is easier to disseminate health related content to masses.

Government has successfully utilised digital mediums to address public health issues. During the Covid-19 pandemic, government has made use of health apps and online portals as an effort to create health literacy on symptoms, treatment, and vaccination. In fact, doctors have treated patients on the basis on online consultations & video calling throughout the lockdown.

The health seeking behaviour of individuals are changing. Today, to derive basic information about a disease's symptoms or preventions, fitness tips, etc people seek digital media's help. However, talking about the audience, such platforms are more popular among the younger generation and digitally literate population. Nevertheless, these platforms are mostly preferred as a secondary source of health communication. In case of serious health issues, people prefer to visit the hospitals themselves instead of depending on digital media. Barriers of using digital platforms include connectivity issues, language problem, awareness and reluctance to change.

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